Fund for Open Information and Accountability, Inc.

36 West 44th Street, New York, N.Y. 10019

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*Legal Counsel
Marshall Perlin

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THIS IS AN EMERGENCY. THE FREEDOM OF INFORMATION ACT -- OUR NATION'S MOST IMPORTANT LAW TO ASSURE OPEN GOVERNMENT AND PREVENT GOVERNMENT SECRECY -- IS THREATENED. IMMEDIATE ACTION IS NEEDED TO STOP THIS THREAT. DETAILS IN LETTER BELOW FROM EDWARD ASNER.

Dear Fellow Citizen,

How seriously do you take your rights as a United States citizen? Seriously enough to get mad and maybe even take action when government treads on those rights?

Yes? Then get mad and read on. Because your government is treading all over a very basic and precious right of yours -- the right to know. And unless something is done now to stop them, that right won't be worth a plugged nickel in a few years. Secrecy and deception in government will rule, and democracy as we know and cherish it could become a thing of the past.

That's no exaggeration.

Here's what's happening: On July 4, Independence Day, 1966, President Johnson signed into law the Freedom of Information Act. It and the subsequent Freedom of Information Amendments are milestones in the fight for open government. They tear away the curtain of secrecy that covers up so many unlawful and anti-democratic actions -- the kind of secrecy that leads to unresponsiveness, arrogance and corruption in government -- the kind of secrecy that almost toppled America with Watergate.

But ... because the Freedom of Information Act threatens to expose the sometimes shady, sometimes outright illegal dealings of some government agencies, there are people in government trying to subvert this law. The FBI, the CIA, the Nuclear Regulatory Commission, the Defense Department, the Federal Trade Commission, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration -- all these agencies and more are trying to get exempted from the Freedom of Information Act.

The agencies claim they have a right to determine what the people of this nation should and should not know about their operations. They have no such right!

The truth is that the Freedom of Information Act does NOT prevent any government agency from carrying out its LEGAL duties. It DOES make it harder for an agency to cover up ILLEGAL activities or dirty tricks.

(over, please)

Bit by bit, these agencies are chipping away at the Freedom of Information Act. Scores of bills have been introduced in Congress to exempt one agency after another from the Act. If its opponents succeed in repealing or nullifying the Freedom of Information Act, it would mean open season on the Bill of Rights. Here's what could happen:

* The FBI could once again conceal its spying on activist individuals and groups -- open their mail, tap their phones, burglarize their offices and homes.

* The CIA could once again hire assassins and secretly test drugs on unsuspecting Americans without fear of discovery.

* No government intelligence agency would need to disclose how it operates, who it serves, how it staffs its projects, or what the purposes of its operations are.

* The Federal Trade Commission could cover up such information as secret price-fixing deals, results of tests that reveal poor product quality or safety, or racial and sex discrimination in hiring.

* The Occupational Safety and Health Administration could allow cover-ups of violations of worker health and safety regulations, chemical hazards and poor safety records in work places.

It is vital that these things not be allowed to happen and that the landmark Freedom of Information Act remain the bulwark of our open society. If you agree, take heart. There is a national public interest organization dedicated to awakening the people of this nation to the critical need for the Freedom of Information Act, and to the Act's implementation and utilization.

The organization is the Fund for Open Information and Accountability (FOIA, Inc.).

No other group in the country is achieving as much for an open society as FOIA, Inc. No other group is as knowledgeable about the Freedom of Information Act, all its significant applications, and the many ways government agencies have or have not complied with it.

The Fund for Open Information and Accountability focuses all its energies on strengthening the Freedom of Information Act and on seeing that the government meets its Constitutional obligations to the people. It is working to improve the ways this significant law can be used by citizens and groups who seek justice and truth, as well as ways to protect their civil rights.

In this way, the Freedom of Information Act can remain the key tool for citizens to get at the truth that lies beneath the deceit, cover-ups and downright lies that government agencies dish out far too frequently.

Consider this true case: A group of Vietnam veterans exposed to the herbicide Agent Orange are suffering from disabling mental and neurological symptoms, and many of their children have been born with birth defects.

To get the facts for arguing their case, they needed government records that showed how the herbicide was used. Using the Freedom of Information Act, they found those records. They also found out that the Veterans Administration ordered the destruction of records that detail instances of cancer among soldiers exposed to Agent Orange in Vietnam and Korea. Witnesses stated the V.A. was trying to cover up evidence of what may be a medical tragedy of gigantic proportions.

Or consider that the Washington Post -- using the Freedom of Information Act -- bared evidence that thousands of Americans exposed to atomic tests three decades ago in Utah and Nevada were not as safe as the Atomic Energy Commission (now Nuclear Regulatory Commission) assured them they were. The newspaper discovered, too, that those findings were never released because of pressure from the AEC.

Or consider the frightening disclosure -- thanks to the Freedom of Information Act -- of how J. Edgar Hoover conducted a vendetta to "get" Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and discredit him in the public's mind.

Or consider the discovery of documents -- thanks to the Freedom of Information Act -- showing collusion by the government, its prosecutors and the courts which led to the conviction and execution of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg.

Or consider the illegal wire-tappings, the mail covers, the infiltration of legal anti-war and civil rights groups, the disruption and harassment of other activist groups, including many church organizations.

Without the Freedom of Information Act, the American people would never know about such unlawful, underhanded activities of government. And without the Fund for Open Information and Accountability to defend it, that Act could shortly become a paper tiger, an empty shell of a law with no meaningful application.

* FOIA, Inc. is a major document center and clearing house where volunteers and staff maintain a library of files for use and information-sharing by historians, researchers, activists and others.

* FOIA, Inc. is a watchdog organization that keeps a close eye on the activities of government agencies to monitor abuses of power and threats to civil liberties ... is the chief whistle blower whenever government agencies try to exempt themselves from the Freedom of Information Act.

* FOIA, Inc. is the advisory center that gives individuals and groups the guidance they need to locate the appropriate government files for their purposes.

This critical case is one of the most important in the history of civil liberties

* FOIA, Inc. is a legal advisor and public advocate on issues relating to civil liberties and the Freedom of Information Act. In 1979, for example, FOIA, Inc. learned that the FBI was destroying valuable historic and political documents, documents which revealed past and current illegal and embarrassing government activities. FOIA, Inc. moved swiftly to prevent further destruction of any such files. Organizing a coalition of indi-

viduals and organizations -- historians, civil rights groups, etc. -- FOIA, Inc. took action in the courts to prevent the FBI from destroying millions of documents. The judge's decision in that case was a major victory for civil liberties. The FBI files, he stated, belong to the American people and the government must preserve them.

Despite this important decision, however, the campaign to weaken the Freedom of Information Act is picking up steam. We're living in a critical period in American history. It is a time when national and international happenings are spurring more and more Americans to action and protest. Inflation, the economic upheaval, the energy crisis, the grave situation in places like Iran and Afghanistan, the growing environmental hazards, the threats from nuclear power plants and nuclear wastes, the new draft -- people are seriously concerned about these matters. And because they are so concerned, they're speaking out. And because more and more people are speaking out, more and more effort is being exerted to thwart popular activist movements.

The enemies of the Freedom of Information Act, those which are opposed to the people's right to know what their government is doing, are resorting to every device to frustrate the Freedom of Information Act and its objectives.

The way to see that they don't succeed is to have an enlightened public.

And for an enlightened public we need the Fund for Open Information and Accountability, Inc.

The Fund for Open Information and Accountability has been able to achieve as much as it has because people like you recognize the mounting problem of secret government in this country, and because they are willing to do their share to fight that secrecy. All we ask is a few dollars -- $15 or $25, or, if you can, $50 -- to help us carry on our work.

Is it worth a few dollars to help prevent the nuclear industry from using you as a guinea pig? Is it worth a few dollars to help stop the military-industrial complex from resuming its pre-Watergate global operations? Is it worth a few dollars to help prevent another scary period of witch hunting in America?

I hope you'll answer yes -- and that you'll take just a moment now to return the enclosed form with your contribution to help FOIA, Inc. carry on its vital work. Those few dollars are a small price to pay to help preserve a very valuable birthright.

Sincerely,

Edward Asner

Edward Asner
for Fund for Open Information
and Accountability